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## Two architectural agaves: *A. victoriae-reginae* and *A. nickelsiae*

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## TWO ARCHITECTURAL AGAVES

### ***A. VICTORIAE-REGINAE* AND *A. NICKELSIAE***

*Agave victoriae-reginae* is a very well-known and deservedly popular architectural species. It has been in cultivation in Europe for around 150 years and was named in honour of Queen Victoria in 1875.

*Agave victoriae-reginae* easily justifies its popularity, being probably the most common *Agave* grown for its architectural good looks (Fig. 1), as opposed to *Agave sisalana* and *A. tequilana* which are raised commercially in vast numbers for the production of sisal and tequila. In my experience, *A. victoriae-reginae* is relatively slow growing in pot culture, which I consider to be another feature of its attractiveness, compared to other faster growing species that require a lot of space quite quickly.

When I spoke at the CSSNSW convention in 2010, I confessed that I had never flowered an agave, partly due to the fact that all my plants are pot grown since

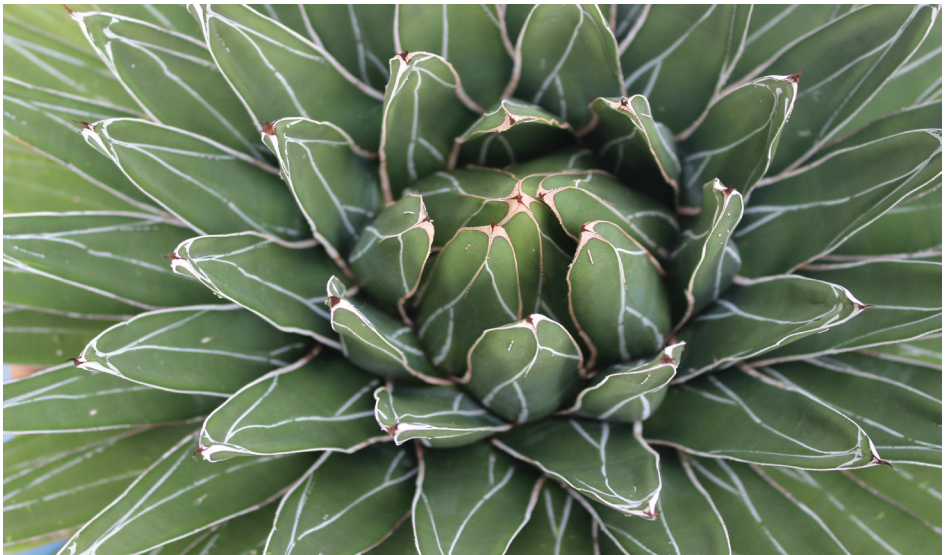


Fig. 1 *Agave victoriae-reginae* showing the wonderful symmetry of this iconic species.  
Photo: Colin Walker

I do not have the luxury of being able to grow them outdoors as you can in Australia. I can now proudly report that I have successfully flowered four species, one of which is *A. victoriae-reginae*.

As a consequence of slow growth in pots, this species takes a long time to reach maturity, flowering age and size. In 2015, my oldest specimen flowered (Figs. 2–4[Fig. 4 Back Cover]). This plant had been in my collection for 25 years, so I estimate it to be around 30 years old at flowering. In May of that year I noticed the flower spike starting to emerge from the centre of the rosette in the greenhouse so the plant was hastily moved outdoors, albeit with some difficulty, so that growth of the inflorescence would not be impeded by the greenhouse glass. Initially the flower spike grew fast and on a single day I recorded a growth



Fig. 2 Early stage of flowering of a 30 year old specimen of *A. victoriae-reginae* with me providing a sense of scale.

Photo: Marjorie Thorburn



Fig. 3 *Agave victoriae-reginae* in full flower with a non-flowering specimen.

Photo: Colin Walker

rate of 20 cm over 24 hours! It reached a maximum height of 1.8 m and it took four months from initiation of the spike to the opening of the first flowers in August. This species is a member of subgenus *Littaea*, characterised by non-branching flower spikes shown clearly in Fig. 3. This contrasts with *Agave* subgenus *Agave*, typified by *A. americana*, which has large, branched inflorescences. Being a single, unbranched rosette, this plant died after flowering with the plant ending its life in a blaze of glory. It was, though, sad to lose a 30 year old specimen plant.

*Agave victoriae-reginae* is, however, far from unusual within the genus since there are some recently described, or at least renamed, look-alikes. The first of these – *Agave nickelsiae* – is another really attractive species that has a long and confused history that will only be briefly summarised here. It was apparently first discovered by Anna B. Nickels, a Texan cactus nurserywoman and was named *Agave nickelsi* Roland-Gosselin in 1895 in her honour. This name languished in obscurity and in 1915 the well-known succulent specialist Alwin Berger regrettably abandoned the name *A. nickelsi* and renamed it *A. ferdinandi-regis* Berger. This latter name is still often encountered in cultivation, as a species distinct from *A. victoriae-reginae*. The most recent reassessment of this group of species has been by a team of Mexican botanists (González-Elizondo *et al.*, 2011). They recognise the old species name *A. nickelsiae* (with a correction of the spelling) with *Agave ferdinandi-regis* as a synonym. Consequently Anna Nickels's *Agave* is again recognised as a beautifully architectural species in its own right, albeit closely related to the long familiar *A. victoriae-reginae*.

To enable comparison of the two species, plants of each are shown in Figs. 5 and 6, whilst a single specimen of *A. nickelsiae* is also shown in Fig. 7. This species is distinguished from *A. victoriae-reginae* by having fewer more bulky leaves, up to 9 cm wide at the base, triangular in cross section and up to 20 cm long in a large specimen. It has prominent chalky white markings up to 4 mm wide, the white lines being continuous or broken up and irregularly arranged. The black leaf tip is up to 1.5 cm long with three short spines and a more prominent central spine up to 1 cm long.



Fig. 5 For comparison, *A. nickelsiae* (left, 35 cm diameter) and *A. victoriae-reginae* (right, 45 cm diameter). Photo: Colin Walker

Finally for now, González-Elizondo *et al.* (2011) described *Agave pintilla* S. González, M. González & L. Reséndiz as a new species. I only have seedlings of this recent addition, so it is too early to report on the relative desirability of this addition to this stunningly beautiful group of agaves. All the plants discussed here are illustrated in John Pilbeam's admirable book 'A Gallery of Agaves (including variegates)' which I thoroughly recommend as a pictorial guide to this splendidly large and diverse genus (Pilbeam, 2013).

I end by thanking my wife Marjorie for comments on an earlier version of this article and for taking the photo in Fig. 2.

## References

- González-Elizondo, M.S., González-Elizondo, M., López-Enríquez, I.L., Reséndiz-Rojas, L., Tena-Flores, J.A. & Retana-Rentería, F.I. (2011) **El complejo *Agave victoriae-reginae* (Agavaceae)**. Acta Bot. Mex. **95**: 65–94.
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Fig. 6 Three specimens showing the variation in *A. victoriae-reginae* (left and centre) and *A. nickelsiae* (two plants on RIGHT). Photo: Colin Walker



Fig. 7 Close-up of *Agave nickelsiae* showing the attractive markings.  
Photo: Colin Walker

